

“Mountains”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

In the Bible, God seems to be fascinated with mountains as meeting places. Most of God’s major revelations occur on one. When God told Abraham to sacrifice his firstborn son, Isaac, the location chosen was a mountain. Moses got the Law from God on a mountain, which I suppose is a smart place for a private rollout before you take the whole thing public. The prophet Elijah had an intense mountainside experience with God. We’ve spent the past several Sundays working our way through Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and as we just heard, Jesus went up a mountain with his disciples Peter, James, and John, where they were met by Moses, Elijah, and God, for Jesus’ transfiguration. More on that in a little bit. In the meantime, think of the transfiguration as a kind of messianic bar mitzvah.

So why is God so tied into mountains? Well, maybe it’s more the case that people in ancient times found God atop mountains more easily than anywhere else. We can think of the Greeks, for example, who believed their gods lived on the heights of Mount Olympus. Most other ancient peoples, including the Israelites, embraced the idea that God and heaven were quite literally up there in the sky among or beyond the stars of night. So perhaps the reason the Israelites encountered God most vividly on mountains is that it was a sensible midway meeting point between where humans lived and where God lived. You split the commute and meet God halfway, at least for the really important stuff.

Whether it was human perception or God’s preference or a little bit of both, many key moments in the Bible happened on mountains, and sometimes the setting steals the show from the event itself. Consider Moses receiving the Law. We’re not given much in the way of detail

about that lengthy process, which stretched over forty days and forty nights. You wonder if there was some sort of negotiation going on up there between God and Moses. Maybe Moses didn't feel much like talking about it once he got down. Whatever the case, we learn next to nothing about how the Law was delivered, odd when you think about how central it was to the life of a whole nation, but the mountain receives a lurid description. "Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain." [Exodus 24:17] And that is one of the briefer and more subdued descriptions of what the mountain looked like on that occasion.

Something similar happens at the transfiguration. Jesus becomes brighter than bright and whiter than white and "a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!'" I love this part, because it's so ironic. God provides this dazzling visual experience, and then chides the disciples to listen. In their defense, there's only so much feeble human senses can handle in the moment.

However, what's missing here is any clear explanation of what the event means. The words God speak remind us of Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan. The presence of Moses and Elijah confirms that Jesus is an eligible Messiah. He stands in line with Moses, who delivered God's message to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Jesus also stands in the lineage of the great prophet Elijah. This message was very important to get across to Matthew's predominantly Jewish audience, many of whom had their doubt that Jesus was the Messiah.

The physical transformation of Jesus seems to be a sort of preview of the resurrection that is yet to come. So the transfiguration binds together the past and the future into a single powerful present moment. It is the ultimate confirmation of what the disciples have just declared, but failed to fully understand: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. But to be honest, that's just our best guess. We really don't know what the transfiguration

was all about. What we do know is that it was awesome, it was important, and it happened on a mountain.

But think about how it affected the disciples. For one thing, they had to keep what they saw and heard secret from the others until after Jesus' resurrection, which must have been tough, because you would expect by now that the twelve were pretty close. Of greater importance, though, is how the transfiguration must have transformed their perspective. Every revelation along the way changed how they saw and thought and felt. This was simply the latest and most fantastic in a series of amazing experiences they enjoyed as followers of Jesus, experiences that fundamentally altered who they were.

Interestingly, that happens to a lesser degree any time you ascend a mountain. Being at a higher elevation gives you a broader perspective on life and the world we live in. Maybe God tends to show up in a big way on mountains for just that reason. The effect of the outward terrain is congruent with the effect on the inward terrain of the soul. If that is so, then how do other aspects of mountaintop experiences, both literal and figurative, affect our faith?

Well, first of all, to get the peak of a mountain, spiritually, we have to climb. In ancient times, there weren't any gondolas or ski lifts to bring people easily and safely up the mountain. They had to do it the old-fashioned way. They climbed. The actual mountains Moses and Jesus ascended are a subject of fierce debate among scholars, but the chief peaks of the region are considerably smaller than the Rockies but a little taller than the Appalachians. So this is not a case of some glorified hill being called a mountain. It was a serious climb, full of risk and danger, requiring strenuous effort.

Like the forbearers and the founder of our faith, we do not enjoy the benefits of modern conveniences when it comes to ascending the spiritual peaks we often encounter in our path. We

have to climb. And whether we experience those spiritual challenges as obstacles or opportunities, the risk, the danger, and the effort are just as real for us as they would be if we were climbing very big chunks of rock instead. Certainly, God lends a hand along the way, in various forms that we call grace, but achieving a spiritual peak that will leave us in awe and alter our perspective takes hard work. Contrary to what some say, there is no quick, easy, risk-free way of receiving the blessings from God that are often delivered only on the top of mountains.

Then there's the highly important and immensely neglected part of scaling high peaks. You cannot live up there. You must come down. And if you've ever climbed a real mountain, you know that the getting down part can be just as tricky as going the other way. Much as we might like to stay forever, we cannot live on the mountaintop. The air is too thin. Water is in short supply. The land isn't arable. And it's too isolated. Besides, gravity and the valley floor beckon.

When we come down, with some regret, we need to retain a sense of gratitude in our hearts for the successful ascent and what we experienced at that rarified altitude. We also need to consider what we will share when we see the people waiting for us down below. Remember that Moses shared the Law, but not much about the experience of how it was given. The disciples were instructed to keep the transfiguration secret until an unspecified future moment, when what they saw would be comprehensible to the others, who stayed down in the valley. We need to share something for the blessing to be complete, but what we share and when need to be considered wisely.

Now there may be some by now who are wondering, "Aren't you going to tell us how to climb?" Friends, you are already climbing. Be aware of that fact. Your presence here is evidence that you are climbing a spiritual mountain, or at the very least, you are getting ready to.

Every time you utter a sincere prayer, simple or deadly serious, you are climbing. Every moment of silence you observe to seek God, you are climbing. Every chapter of scripture you read, every rock solid book on the life of the spirit you digest, you are climbing. Every kind thought, word, or deed that passes through your mind, your mouth, or your hand, is another step up the spiritual mountain.

Be aware of that, and be aware that you do not climb alone, and even though every person's path is a little bit different, the best way up the mountain has been charted by those who came before us. Follow that path. Help your brothers and sisters. Help strangers you meet along the way. Accept help from others humbly and thankfully.

If heights make you nervous, don't let your nerves hold you back. The climb is worth it, and unlike a mountain made of stone, when you fall on the spiritual mountain, you may bruise, but you will not break or die. The more you climb, the more confident you become: in yourself, in your companions on the way; and in God. Climbing strengthens your faith -- your deep trusting relationship with God -- just as climbing the Matterhorn strengthens your muscles and bones.

So enjoy the climb. Jesus is with us the whole way, and once we get to the top, who knows what sort of surprise God will have waiting for us: new wisdom for daily living; perhaps a major shift in perspective; or even a rare and fresh vision of Jesus that starkly reveals who he really is. Amen.